

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Alice Sara Ott: John Field & Beethoven

Friday 7 February 2025, 7pm

Queen Elizabeth Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Field Nocturne No.17 in C, H.61 4'

Beethoven Piano Sonata in G minor, Op.49 No.1 8'

Field Nocturnes:

No.1 in E flat, H.24 4'

No.2 in C minor, H.25 3'

No.4 in A, H.36 5'30

No.10 in E, H.54 6'30

Beethoven Piano Sonata in E, Op.109 20'

Interval

Field Nocturnes:

No.14 in G, H.58 3'

No.16 in C, H.60 9'30

No.9 in E minor, H.46 3'30

No.12 in E, H.13 5'

Beethoven Piano Sonata in C sharp minor, Op.27 No.2 (Quasi una fantasia - Moonlight) 16'

Performer

Alice Sara Ott *piano*

This performance lasts approximately 2 hours including an interval.

The nocturne has a long, rich and particularly varied history among piano composers. Just think of examples down the centuries by Liszt and Scriabin, Satie and Poulenc, even Debussy (in orchestral form). Probably towering over all of his composer colleagues in nocturnal terms is Frédéric Chopin, who composed no fewer than 21 examples.

It may be the very freedom that the nocturne offers – a form or style defined more by a mood of wistfulness, yearning or even sadness than by strict rules of structure or harmony – that has attracted so many composers, and that has also led to such a variety of nocturnal creations.

There is no lack of variety, as we will hear, among the 18 nocturnes composed by Dublin-born pianist and composer John Field, the musician who coined the term 'nocturne' in the first place. Field was born into a musical family and gave his first public performances aged just nine, before the family moved to London in 1793. Field's playing – hugely popular for its delicacy and its singing melodies – later took him right across Europe (he briefly met Beethoven in Vienna around 1803). He settled in St Petersburg, where he composed his keyboard nocturnes between 1812 and 1822, and again between 1832 and 1836. Chopin reputedly adored them, and built on Field's innovations in his own more pioneering developments (though Field himself was hardly a fan of the more strident dissonances and turbulent emotions of the younger composer's nocturnes).

Identifying Field's nocturnes isn't easy, since the composer himself didn't number them. Tonight's concert, therefore, goes by the numbering in the collection published by J. Schuberth & Co. in 1859, edited by Franz Liszt, who argued that the Irish composer was a peerless talent in his preface: 'None have quite attained these vague aeolian harmonies, these half-formed sighs floating through the air, softly lamenting and dissolved in delicious melancholy.'

John Field (1782–1837)

Nocturne No.17 in C, H.61

With its strong definition and clarity, tonight's first nocturne, No.17 in C, may feel more like a sonata opening movement than what we might expect from a dreamy nocturne. It is gentle and song-like throughout, even conveying mischief in its unpredictability.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Piano Sonata in G minor, Op.49 No.1

1 *Andante*

2 *Rondo: Allegro*

Ludwig van Beethoven wrote no pieces that he called nocturnes, though there is a strand of quiet introspection – even visionary transcendentalism – running through some of his music that we might legitimately term 'nocturnal'. It might be quite a stretch

to claim there's anything particularly nocturnal about his Piano Sonata in G minor, Op.49 No.1, though its extreme brevity and its musical sophistication make it something of a precursor to the spirituality of the Sonata in E, Op.109, which we'll hear later.

The Sonata in G minor was published in 1805, two years after he had met Field, without Beethoven's explicit consent. His younger brother Kaspar, who had effectively been working as the composer's business manager, dispatched it to satisfy a publisher's demand for new material. Beethoven had written the piece several years earlier, probably as a straightforward work for teaching purposes, though there is little compromise in the music's emotional complexity. After its introspective first movement, Beethoven dispenses with the traditional second (and maybe third) sonata movements to move straight into a finale, whose spiky, mercurial theme returns again and again.

John Field

Nocturne No.1 in E flat, H.24

Nocturne No.2 in C minor, H.25

Nocturne No.4 in A, H.36

Nocturne No.10 in E, H.54

We return to Field for a quartet of pieces that demonstrate the breadth of moods he conjured in his nocturnes. With its gentle, singing melody and rippling accompaniment, No.1 may be close to what we would expect from the form, with No.2 in many ways its melancholy sibling. No.4 is on a more ambitious scale, its opening surely evoking an opera aria before a central section that passes through yearning, despair, even anger. No.10 is equally ambitious: it opens as a song with, perhaps, gently strummed guitar accompaniment, and closes with keyboard flights of fancy that grow ever more effusive in their decorations.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Piano Sonata in E, Op.109

1 *Vivace, ma non troppo. Sempre legato*

2 *Prestissimo*

3 *Gesangvoll mit innigster Empfindung.
Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo*

From a sonata composed by the still youthful Beethoven, we turn to the first of the composer's mighty final trilogy of piano sonatas, written just a few years before his death. Like tonight's earlier sonata, however, the Sonata in E, Op.109, is work of immense compression and concentration: its two succinct opening movements set up a battle of opposing extremes that is only resolved by the ineffable, visionary calm of its unhurried finale.

Beethoven wrote the piece in 1820, and dedicated it to Maximiliane Brentano, daughter of his friends and benefactors Franz and Antonie Brentano (the latter very possibly the dedicatee of his amorous letter of 1812 to an unidentified 'immortal beloved'). As earlier, Beethoven here treats established keyboard conventions with a freedom and originality that aligns the piece with similar innovations in the newfangled nocturne form. His remarkably compact opening movement contrasts a brief opening theme with a second idea in an entirely different key, tempo and rhythm. He throws us into the nightmarish intensity of his frenzied second movement without a break. It is left to his third movement – a songful theme with six eclectically disparate variations – to reconcile the opposing forces he's unleashed. When the finale's theme

returns to close the Sonata, we may (to misquote TS Eliot) feel that we've arrived back where we started, only to know the place for the first time.

John Field

Nocturne No.14 in G, H.58

Nocturne No.16 in C, H.60

Nocturne No.9 in E minor, H.46

Nocturne No.12 in E, H.13

A final selection from Field's 18 nocturnes again shows the breadth of his creations in the form, from the open-air contentment of No.14 to the yearning of No.16 and the deep, resigned grief of No.9. One of the most cheerful, exuberant pieces in the collection, No.12 has a perky initial melody and even some distinctly Beethovenian drama in its central episode. Listen out, too, for the insistent bell that chimes through its magical closing passage, perhaps to wake us from our slumber.

Ludwig Beethoven

**Piano Sonata in C sharp minor, Op.27 No.2
(Quasi una fantasia – Moonlight)**

1 *Adagio sostenuto*

2 *Allegretto*

3 *Presto agitato*

What for us is probably the closest Beethoven came to writing a nocturne – as suggested by its 'Moonlight' epithet – was probably nothing of the sort to the composer himself. That nocturnal nickname wasn't his: it is usually put down to German poet and novelist Ludwig Rellstab, who likened the Sonata's opening to moonlight shining on Lake Lucerne. For Beethoven, the Sonata was 'quasi una fantasia' (or 'almost a fantasia'), again indicating a fresh and radical approach to long-standing sonata conventions.

He wrote the piece in 1802, and dedicated it to his keyboard pupil, Countess Julie 'Giulietta' Guicciardi, with whom he became so infatuated that he even proposed marriage (an offer politely but firmly declined by the young woman's aristocratic parents). Connecting a composer's biography and musical creations is seldom convincing, but it wasn't an easy time for Beethoven, who was coming to terms with his inevitable loss of hearing, and who that same year would write a letter to his brothers (never sent) that revealed he had contemplated suicide. The composer himself never indicated any biographical subtext to the Sonata in C sharp minor, but it's not hard to find one.

Its slow, sombre opening movement is probably the closest Beethoven came to some of Field's nocturnal creations. Beethoven follows it, however, with a bright, tripping central movement, as though the clouds have parted to let in the light. His final movement is music of relentless ferocity, stormy and angry from start to finish. It provides an unflinchingly bleak response to the opening movement's sombre contemplations, as well as the Sonata's most technically ostentatious material.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2025

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